

The background of the cover features a pattern of interlocking puzzle pieces. Some pieces are solid blue, while others are grey with a white outline. A large, faint, light grey puzzle piece is also visible in the center-right area.

Three Rivers Planning & Development District

Comprehensive
Economic
Development
Strategy
2017-2021

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Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy 2017-2021

- 5 - Introduction
- 7 - Executive Summary
- 10 - Regional Background
- 16 - Strengths & Opportunities
- 18 - Weaknesses & Threats
- 20 - Goals & Objectives
- 21 - Plan of Action & Integration
Performance Measures
- 22 - Regional Resiliency
- 23 - Public & Private Partnership
CEDS Committee
- 24 - Public Notice & Comments
- 25 - Appendix

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1: Introduction

Three Rivers Planning and Development District (Three Rivers) is a private, non-profit organization formed by local government entities and business leaders to promote overall economic development, foster responsible short- and long-term community planning, and to aid general civic, social, and economic development. Under the leadership of Vernon R. (Randy) Kelley, III, Three Rivers promotes, administers, and interprets a wide variety of programs that fall under the jurisdiction of various state and federal agencies.

Three Rivers has provided valuable assistance to its economic and community development partners since its inception in 1971 and will continue to play a primary role as the region continues to grow and develop. Three Rivers strives to be creative, innovative, and proactive in regards to the provision of its services and understands the vital role of partnerships.

Three Rivers' Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) serves as an economic roadmap to diversify and strengthen the regional economy of its primary service area, which consists of Calhoun, Chickasaw, Itawamba, Lafayette, Lee, Monroe, Pontotoc, and Union counties in northeast Mississippi. The CEDS analyzes the regional economy and functions as a guide for establishing regional goals and objectives, developing and implementing a regional plan of action, and identifying investment priorities and funding sources. Public and private partnerships are critical to the successful implementation of the CEDS and the document will be critical in Three Rivers' efforts to defend against economic dislocations that result in the loss of jobs and private investment.

Three Rivers' CEDS coincides with the mission of the Economic Development Administration (EDA), which is "to lead the federal economic development agenda by promoting innovation and competitiveness, preparing American regions for growth and success in the worldwide economy." Three Rivers recognizes the importance of establishing a foundation for sustainable job growth and the building of a durable regional economy in order to compete in today's global marketplace. In fact, the district has built a national reputation for its innovative and collaborative economic and community development strategies over the past thirty years.

Three Rivers understands competing within the global economy is similar to running a marathon. If you remain

in one place and do not continue to push forward, you not only fail to advance, you fall farther behind your competitors the longer you continue to stagnate. Today, innovation is vital in order to be competitive on a global scale and cultivate new and better jobs. If a region does not seek to inspire and encourage innovation, it will be left with a weakened and susceptible economy that is destined to falter. Regions must seek to develop initiatives that advance new ideas and creative approaches so they can properly address evolving economic conditions. With its CEDS, Three Rivers seeks to promote such advancement in order to help the region better compete in the global marketplace.

Similar to innovation, regional collaboration is essential for economic growth because regions are the centers of competition in the global economy. Regions that work together to leverage resources and use their strengths to overcome their weaknesses will fair appreciably better than those that do not. Three Rivers' success has been built on a collaborative spirit that supersedes many of the physical and administrative limitations other areas place on themselves. The success stories noted within the CEDS could not have been accomplished without the multitude of partnerships Three Rivers has developed with the public and private sectors. The latest CEDS seeks to further advance the regional approach that has enabled Three Rivers and its partners to successfully recruit global companies such as Toyota to the region.

As part of the CEDS development process, Three Rivers and its CEDS strategy committee analyzed the region's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The aforementioned SWOT analysis was part of Three Rivers' comprehensive economic development planning process and helped determine the CEDS goals and objectives as well as formulate a plan of action for the next five-year period.

Three Rivers works closely with representatives of the public and private sectors on a continual basis as it seeks to foster economic and community development throughout its eight-county region. Three Rivers has widespread support among local elected officials, business leaders, and other stakeholders based on its proven track record and innovative approaches. The latest CEDS further reinforces the importance of partnerships and regional approaches to bring much-needed jobs and private investment to northeast Mississippi.

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2: Executive Summary

Three Rivers Planning and Development District (Three Rivers) is a private, non-profit organization formed by local government entities and business leaders to promote overall economic development, foster responsible short- and long-term community planning, and to aid general civic, social, and economic development. Three Rivers' Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) serves as an economic roadmap to diversify and strengthen the regional economy of its primary service area, which consists of Calhoun, Chickasaw, Itawamba, Lafayette, Lee, Monroe, Pontotoc, and Union counties in northeast Mississippi. The CEDS analyzes the regional economy and functions as a guide for establishing regional goals and objectives, developing and implementing a regional plan of action, and identifying investment priorities and funding sources. Public and private partnerships are critical to the successful implementation of the CEDS and the document will be critical in Three Rivers' efforts to defend against economic dislocations that result in the loss of jobs and private investment.

Strengths & Opportunities

1. Collaborative Approach to Economic and Community Development
2. Dedicated Labor Force
3. Excellent Workforce Development System
4. Renowned University and Community Colleges
5. Health Care Growth Opportunities
6. Tuition Assistance Program
7. Emerging Automotive Sector
8. Reshoring Opportunities
9. Plentiful Natural Resources
10. Multimodal Capabilities

Weaknesses & Threats

1. Low Educational Attainment
2. Infrastructure Deficiencies
3. Low Percentage of Innovation
4. Low Average Annual Wages
5. Limited Financial Resources
6. Global Economic Fluctuations
7. Brain Drain
8. Long-Term Poverty Cycle

Vision Statement

Three Rivers seeks to promote overall economic development, foster responsible short- and long-term community planning, and aid general civic, social, and economic development.

Goals & Objectives

Goal 1: Develop and Enhance the Regional Infrastructure to Increase Economic Competitiveness

- Objective 1.1: Improve utility and transportation infrastructure as well as other public facilities for community and economic development
- Objective 1.2: Increase access and utilization of telecommunications technology
- Objective 1.3: Promote and further develop multimodal transportation networks
- Objective 1.4: Preserve and enhance environmental assets through revitalization, reclamation, and promotion of environmental stewardship
- Objective 1.5: Identify, secure, and improve properties for economic utilization
- Objective 1.6: Identify and implement planning and technical assistance initiatives for existing and future infrastructure systems

Goal 2: Increase Regional Job Opportunities and Income

- Objective 2.1: Diversify the economic base by targeting new businesses and emerging sectors
- Objective 2.2: Increase the domestic and global competitiveness of the existing economic base
- Objective 2.3: Enhance regional entrepreneurial activity and small business development
- Objective 2.4: Foster the development and utilization of innovative technologies
- Objective 2.5: Identify, develop, and market strategic regional assets
- Objective 2.6: Promote sustainable economic uses of natural resources
- Objective 2.7: Promote investments in sustainable energy and other “green” projects
- Objective 2.8: Identify and implement planning and technical assistance initiatives to strengthen regional job and capital investment opportunities
- Objective 2.9: Enhance regional marketing tools and resources

Goal 3: Strengthen the Capacity of the Region to Compete in the Global Economy

- Objective 3.1: Enhance workforce skills through training and education
- Objective 3.2: Increase educational attainment and achievement
- Objective 3.3: Increase access to quality early childhood and K-12 education
- Objective 3.4: Increase the availability of affordable, high-quality health care
- Objective 3.5: Promote regional collaboration involving the public and private sectors and community leadership development
- Objective 3.6: Improve the availability and affordability of regional housing
- Objective 3.7: Enhance cultural and recreational opportunities
- Objective 3.8: Improve public transit opportunities
- Objective 3.9: Identify and implement planning and technical assistance initiatives to strengthen regional competitiveness

Plan of Action

Three Rivers has developed a plan of action to implement the goals and objectives of the CEDS in a manner that:

- A. Promotes economic development and opportunity
- B. Fosters effective transportation access
- C. Enhances and protects the environment
- D. Maximizes effective development and use of the workforce consistent with any applicable state or local workforce investment strategy
- E. Promotes the use of technology in economic development, including access to high-speed telecommunications
- F. Balances resources through sound management of physical development
- G. Obtains and utilizes adequate funds and other resources

Performance Measures

The primary performance measures used to evaluate Three Rivers' development and implementation of the CEDS include (but are not limited to) the following:

- A. Number of jobs created after implementation of the CEDS
- B. Amount of private sector investment after implementation of the CEDS
- C. Number of jobs retained in the region
- D. Number and types of investments undertaken within the region
- E. Changes in the economic environment of the region

Plan Integration

The goals and objectives included within this CEDS line up with the economic development priorities of the State of Mississippi, the Appalachian Regional Commission, and the Delta Regional Authority as well as local and state workforce investment strategies and other local and regional planning mechanisms.

Public & Private Sector Partnership

The development of the new CEDS has been a collaborative effort involving both the public and private sectors. Three Rivers and other economic development stakeholders have coordinated their efforts and resources to develop a vision for the forthcoming five-year CEDS cycle. Public and private sector representatives from throughout the region understand the importance of a collaborative approach and have helped implement regional economic development strategies and initiatives for many years. The ten-member CEDS strategy committee provided a wealth of knowledge regarding the state of the region and their input was vital to the development of this document. The committee members work in the trenches to foster positive economic outcomes every single day and their collective knowledge and experience served as vital resources in communicating regional strengths, weaknesses, needs, and opportunities.

3: Regional Background



Demographic & Socioeconomic Characteristics

Three Rivers Planning and Development District includes the counties of Calhoun, Chickasaw, Itawamba, Lafayette, Lee, Monroe, Pontotoc, and Union in the northeast corner of Mississippi. The region is mostly a rural area with county seats being the most populated areas of each county. The total population for the Three Rivers district is 286,339. Oxford (20,769) and Tupelo (35,561) are the most populated cities within the region.

In the past five years, most counties

have seen a slight population growth. The region's growth rate (2.2%) is higher than the state rate (1.5%) and is close to the national rate (2.5%) for the 5-year period. Five counties within the region have seen growth in the last five years: Itawamba – 0.2%, Lafayette – 8.1%, Lee – 2.6%, Pontotoc – 1.9%, and Union – 2.5%.

Chickasaw County saw a population loss over the past five years, but 2015 estimates predict the population has increased back to 2010 totals (2015: 17,391 vs 2010: 17,392).

Calhoun and Monroe counties saw population loss, -1.2% and -2.2% respectively, during the current 5-year

period. Calhoun County has been designated a distressed county for several years and Monroe County has been an at-risk county.

The median age for most counties within the region is around 38 and is on par for Mississippi (37). This is significant to note because the current skilled, knowledgeable work force will be available for local industries for another decade or more. On average, 79% of those working and living within the Three Rivers district have at least a high school diploma or equivalent. While this is lower than the state percentage (82%) and national (87%) of high school graduates, this is higher

than 2010 average estimates for the region (75.4%) and state (78%). In 2015, Mississippi adopted legislation to push to graduate 85% of each class by the 2018-2019 school year. Though the Three Rivers district is short currently, the increase from 2010 to 2015 shows the region could reach the state goal by the designated time.

While there has been a state-wide push for increasing high school graduation rates, there also has been a local push to have high school graduates continue their education. Through the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), students within the Three Rivers district who maintain a certain grade point average (GPA) are eligible for four semesters' worth of assistance. According to 2015 estimates, an average of 48.9% of residents aged 18-24 have at least some college or an Associate's degree. While the percentage of residents with some college or an Associate's degree and having some college participation can't be directly linked to TAP, 1,842 area high school seniors have been helped by the program since 2012.

Although there has been an increase in residents participating in some college or obtaining their Associate's degree, the Three Rivers district is well below national (18.5%) and state (12.9%) percentages for earning their Bachelor's degree. Lafayette County has the highest presence of Bachelor's degrees (21.7%) which can be attributed to the University of Mississippi being located within the county. Lee County has the second highest rate of Bachelor's degree obtainment at 14.1%. Calhoun County has the lowest percentage (6.3%) of Bachelor's degree obtainment. The percentage of residents within the Three Rivers district with a graduate or professional degree is even smaller than those obtaining a Bachelor's degree. By 2015 estimates, excluding Lafayette County, the district has an average of 4.9% of residents with a graduate or professional degree. Lafayette County, with the university, has 16.7% of residents with

Three Rivers Planning & Development District at-a-glance

Total population: 286,339

Average median age: 38

**Total population with high school
diploma/equivalent: 79%**

**Residents 18-24 with some college
or an Associate's Degree: 48.9%**

Unemployment rate (July 2017): 5.2%

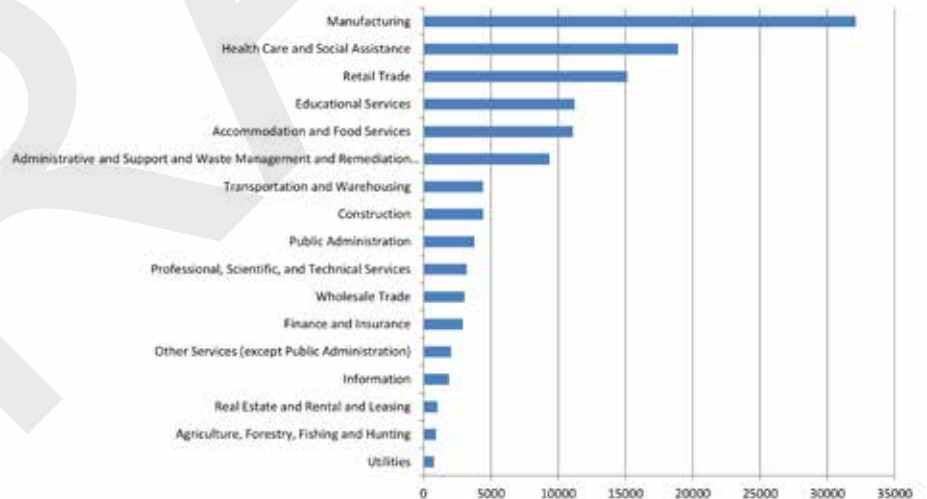
*Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey Five Year Estimates 2011-2015
Mississippi Department of Employment Security*



a graduate or professional degree.

Regional higher educational attainment is low for the region because of the cost burden associated with a degree or work opportunities aren't available. Those who have higher educational degrees end-up falling prey to brain drain and leave the area for regions that have better job opportunities. Five-year estimates show three counties – Calhoun (-313), Chickasaw (-608), and Monroe (-1,201) – have had significant migration from their counties.

Employment participation remains steady within the Three Rivers district with 131,114 employed workers from the labor force. Manufacturing continues to be the largest regional employment sector and continues to increase. Health care and social assistance, retail trade, educational services, and food service and accommodations round out the top five sectors for the region, but their percentages are significantly less compared to manufacturing. Manufacturing comprises almost a quarter of



Source: U.S. Census Bureau Quarterly Workforce Indicators Explorer 2016 estimates

the region's total employment. While regional unemployment rate isn't as high as it was during the recession, the June 2017 unemployment rate of 5.2% is slightly above the state rate (5.0%) and almost one full point above the national rate (4.3%).

Workers looking for help gaining employment in the Three Rivers

district have help in The Mississippi Partnership, a workforce investment area responsible for establishing and maintaining a system that provides high-quality services and a skilled workforce. The Mississippi Partnership is a 27-county area designated under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) and covers the largest

geographical area of Mississippi's four workforce investment areas.

The Partnership is responsible for establishing local performance standards, overseeing one-stop delivery centers known as Workforce Investment Network (WIN) Job Centers, selecting qualified service providers for youth services, and monitoring performance. The one-stop delivery centers offer services to adults and dislocated workers through case management, counseling, and training to assist in obtaining employment. The WIN Job Centers also assist local employers in locating suitable employees. The Partnership also serves economically disadvantaged youth by providing tutoring, summer employment opportunities, adult mentoring, occupational skills training, and follow-up services.

Through an EDA investment, the Itawamba Community College (ICC) Belden Center serves as a testing and training site for many employers throughout the region. The ICC Belden Center and WIN Job Centers throughout the region have provided WorkKeys assessments for job seekers. WorkKeys assessments help employers select, hire, train, develop, and retain a high-performance workforce. Through assessments in applied mathematics, locating information, and reading for information, those seeking employment can earn an ACT National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC), a credential demonstrating achievement of a certain level of workplace employable skills. Combining measures of cognitive thinking and work-related behaviors gives a greater accuracy in predicting an individual's success at work and training.

Income disparity is an issue most in the Three Rivers district have to consider when deciding to live and work within the eight counties. Nationally the average wage is \$55,484, for the State of Mississippi it is \$39,312, and the average within the region is \$36,030. Chickasaw and Calhoun counties which are considered distressed and

at-risk have the lowest wage rates at \$32,864 and \$28,652, respectfully. The only two counties above the state wage rate are Monroe (\$39,988) and Union (\$40,300) even though they are significantly lower than the national average.

Lower wages affect the per capita income for residents. Per capita income is measured by both the U.S. Census Bureau and by the Bureau of Economic Analysis, but each measure things differently. The Census Bureau considers per capita income (PCI) to be cash and its equivalents. By that definition the counties within the Three Rivers district have the following PCI: Calhoun, \$17,434; Chickasaw, \$17,538; Itawamba, \$19,483; Lafayette, \$23,227; Lee, \$22,282; Monroe, \$19,215; Pontotoc, \$19,695; and Union, \$18,889. The BEA's definition of per capita income counts cash, savings, and most investments. To distinguish between the two, the BEA's per capita income is often referred to as per capita personal income (PCPI). Counties within the Three Rivers district PCPI is as followed: Calhoun, \$28,948; Chickasaw, \$32,248; Itawamba, \$31,954; Lafayette, \$35,342; Lee, \$37,426; Monroe, \$32,455; Pontotoc, \$29,950; and Union, \$30,729. Because PCI is calculated by dividing the total income for the county by the total number of residents, it isn't an accurate portrait of the average person within the Three Rivers district.

To get a better idea of the financial situation of residents within the Three Rivers district, the median household income should be compared. In 2010, Calhoun County had the lowest estimated median household income at \$28,484. Using 2015 inflated dollars, the estimated median household income for Calhoun County is now \$31,098. Though this estimate is higher, it is still below Mississippi's median household income (\$39,665) and is notably lower than the national median (\$53,889). All counties within the Three Rivers district have shown growth in median household income,

but Chickasaw County shows the lowest increase (\$2010: 30,092 vs 2015: \$30,926).

While median household incomes have increased the last five years, the counties within the Three Rivers district have high poverty rates. The 2017 U.S. poverty rate is 15.5% and the state of Mississippi is 22.5%. Union County has the same poverty rate as Mississippi. Four counties – Itawamba (18.8%), Lee (18.3%), Monroe (19.9%), and Pontotoc (16.2%) – have rates higher than the state but are still much higher than the national rate. Calhoun (25.9%) and Chickasaw (26.3%) counties have rates exceeding 20%. Lafayette County (25.8%) has a rate higher than 20% but this percentage is impacted by the number of college students living within the county.

Environmental Characteristics

Similar to the rest of Mississippi, Three Rivers and has exceptionally clean air and abundant water resources, which make the region ideal for Greenfield industrial sites. Mississippi is one of the few states meeting all of the national ambient air quality standards for protection of public health and welfare and there are no non-attainment areas in the state.

Three Rivers has a somewhat higher elevation than many other areas and has a more hilly terrain than many other parts of the state. Three Rivers has a humid, subtropical climate with long summers and short, mild winters. Annual precipitation typically ranges from 54 to 60 inches depending upon location and snowfall is typically minor in terms to accumulation. Thunderstorms are common and the region is susceptible to severe weather events such as tornadoes, primarily during the spring, summer, and fall. Flooding is a problem in low-lying parts of the region, especially in areas near streams, rivers, and other bodies of water. Due to the topography of the region and the large

number of hydrographical features, floodplain and wetlands areas are common.

On federally-funded projects, Three Rivers seeks wetlands determinations from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and reviews the latest Flood Insurance Rate Maps produced by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to see if the proposed scope of work will take place in a wetland or floodplain. Similar environmental consultations take place with governmental entities such as the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDA&H) and others to ensure federally-funded projects will not negatively impact the environment. Most communities in Three Rivers' eight-county region actively participate in the National Flood Insurance Program and floodplain administrators work with developers to make certain FEMA guidelines are followed.

Obtaining environmental permits in Mississippi is simplified since most state and federal permits are issued by the Mississippi Department of Environmental (MDEQ) and most of Mississippi's environmental regulations are identical to federal regulations. In fact, the MDEQ is the designated authority to issue almost all federal environmental permits.

Other agencies issuing environmental permits are the Mississippi Oil and Gas Board; the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks; the Mississippi Department of Archives and History; and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Northeast Mississippi is a region of fertile black earth that extends into the Alabama Black Belt and is heavily forested. Forestry and forest products contribute to several economic sectors and are critical components of the regional economy.

While not a major employer, agriculture continues to be an important part of the regional economy with a significant amount of acreage devoted to pasture/hay, soybeans, corn, cotton, other agri-



cultural uses. In addition, there are several natural gas and oil wells throughout the southern and eastern portions of the region. All of the identified natural resources create jobs throughout the region and generate direct and indirect revenue and investment.

Transportation Characteristics

Four-lane highway access is critical and many rural areas are in desperate need of such access in order to make their communities more attractive to existing and prospective businesses. Several two-lane highways have traffic volumes that far exceed their original target capacities.

High traffic volumes have caused excessive wear on many of the region's highways and bridges. Recent economic development investments as well as population growth in certain areas has caused the need for a wide variety of transportation infrastructure projects throughout the region. However, state and federal funding for such projects is limited and it will likely take several years for many projects to come to fruition.

Rail infrastructure is another vital regional transportation component. Enhanced rail accessibility and capac-

ity are needed in certain areas of the region in order to open up additional economic growth opportunities. Rail enhancements, especially those offering improved multimodal capabilities, will yield significant economic impacts as many companies look to move more materials and goods via rail rather than road due to ever-increasing fuel costs as well as other considerations. Burlington Northern, Kansas City Southern, and other renowned companies own the rail located throughout the region.

The Tanglefoot Trail, a 44-mile rails to trails project, has enabled a consortium of local governments located between New Albany and Houston to maintain an abandoned rail corridor and its 100-foot right-of-way. Three Rivers serves as the fiscal and administrative agent for the GM&O Rails-to-Trails Recreational District of North Mississippi.

The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, which travels 234 miles through Itawamba and Monroe counties, provides benefits such as lower transportation costs, expanded markets, safer and more reliable transport of goods, energy efficiency, and environmental compatibility for companies and industries. The northernmost point is located at Pickwick Lake on the Tennessee River

and the waterway flows through north-east Mississippi and western Alabama before it connects with the established Warrior-Tombigbee navigation system at Demopolis, Alabama. From Demopolis, commerce travels northward as far as Port Birmingham, Alabama, and south to Mobile and other Gulf Coast destinations.

Port Itawamba is located in Fulton and includes a 260-foot by 1,100-foot barge fleeting area as well as additional 1,200-foot mooring and handling space with no more than four-inch water fluctuation. The port also has a humidity-controlled warehouse, paved outdoor storage, a 60-ton capacity crane (a previous EDA investment), a conveyor, roll-on/roll-off loading, truck unloading facilities, certified truck scales, and a short-track rail with connections to Burlington Northern. Port Itawamba offers a full line of logistics tailored to each client, bulk, steel, and palletized cargo handling, cross docking, long- and short-term warehousing, inventory management, bar coding, import/export assistance, and logistics consulting.

The Port of Aberdeen and Port of Amory are located in Monroe County. The Port of Aberdeen includes a concrete dock, a mooring cell, a 100-ton capacity mobile crane, truck scales, a warehouse, and an outdoor storage area with an asphalt surface. The port is owned by the City of Aberdeen and is utilized for general freight transfer, including grain, bentonite, wood products, and petroleum. The Port of Amory includes a bulkhead wood dock with steel pilings, a mooring cell, a 30-ton capacity crane, and an open storage area with an asphalt surface. The port is utilized for general freight transfer, including grain and lumber.

Three Rivers Planning and Development District is also home to the Tupelo Regional Airport, the region's only commercial airport. Contour Airlines provides daily flights to Nashville through Tupelo. While no other commercial airports are located in the region, it is important to note several airports such as

Memphis International Airport are within a reasonable driving distance and offer alternative air service options.

Please note the following municipalities have public, non-commercial airport service: Bruce, Calhoun City, Houston, Okolona, Fulton, Oxford, Aberdeen, Amory, Pontotoc, and New Albany.

County Financial Characteristics

As a non-metropolitan region, Three Rivers does not have the same tax base as some of its more urbanized counterparts throughout the state and nation. Smaller tax revenues and limited financial resources often hinder the economic and community development activities of rural local governments. Whereas certain metropolitan communities have sufficient financial resources to buy a tract of land in a limited timeframe or significantly upgrade their utility systems with no external funding sources, non-metropolitan communities often do not have those same luxuries. Effective planning, maintenance, and leadership can offset some fiscal restrictions and enable a rural community to foster significant economic growth and prosperity.

Certain local governments in the region have more financial resources than others and the differential has a significant impact on regional economic and community development activities. While larger counties and municipalities typically have higher revenue streams, it is important to note that local government budgets are tight throughout the region, especially in the wake of budget cuts at the state and federal levels that filter down to the local level.

Three Rivers will continue to work with its local, state, and federal partners to ensure the region's local governments can continue to foster positive short- and long-term economic impacts in spite of financial limitations. Economic development stakeholders will continue to utilize available resources to promote job creation and private investment throughout northeast Mississippi.

Potential Funding Sources & Partners:

- Appalachian Regional Commission
- CREATE Foundation
- Delta Regional Authority
- E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation
- Economic Development Administration
- Federal Emergency Management Agency
- Federal Highway Administration
- Gilmore Foundation
- Itawamba Community College
- Local Economic Development Organizations (Chambers of Commerce, Etc.)
- Local Governments (Counties, Municipalities, Etc.)
- Local School Districts
- Mississippi Department of Archives and History
- Mississippi Department of Employment Security
- Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality
- Mississippi Department of Human Services
- Mississippi Department of Public Safety
- Mississippi Department of Transportation
- Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks
- Mississippi Development Authority
- Mississippi Emergency Management Agency
- Mississippi Main Street
- Mississippi State Department of Health
- Mississippi State University
- National Park Service
- Northeast Mississippi Community College
- Northwest Mississippi Community College
- Rural Utilities Service
- Small Business Administration
- State of Mississippi
- Tennessee Valley Authority
- Three Rivers Planning and Development District
- Three Rivers Solid Waste Management Authority
- Tombigbee River Valley Water Management District
- University of Mississippi
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- U.S. Department of Agriculture
- U.S. Department of Commerce
- U.S. Department of Energy
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
- U.S. Department of Justice
- U.S. Department of Transportation
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

4: SWOT Analysis

Strengths & Opportunities

COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: Three Rivers has built a strong reputation for its collaborative approach to economic and community development. It takes pride in developing partnerships across many levels, especially economic and community development activities. Examples of this approach include; A.) Working with Federal, State, and Regional Public and Private Partners to successfully operate one of the premier RLF programs in the County. Three Rivers' RLF operates various loan funds that have had a huge impact on business financing and economic development since the mid 80s. While working with private lending institutions, these loans have positively impacted over numerous jobs in the region. B.) Three Rivers CDE, a subsidiary of TRPDD has successfully utilized the New Market Tax Credit Program through the CDFI fund / Dept of Treasury to deploy \$40 million in project financing over the last five years. As the first LDD in the nation to receive an allocation, Three Rivers worked with numerous partners to close multiple projects. C.) Three Rivers Community & Economic Development Division provides financial packaging assistance, infrastructure development assistance, and administration to local economic development organizations and local governments on both business recruitment and expansion efforts. D.) The PUL Alliance utilized an innovative concept by forming the State of Mississippi's first regional multi-County economic development alliance to develop and market a large-scale industrial site. This project culminated with Toyota Motor Company building a \$1.3 billion manufacturing facility on a 1,730-acre tract of land owned and marketed by The PUL Al-

liance. Since the announcement, several Tier 1 automotive suppliers have announced locations throughout northeast Mississippi and the automotive sector is now a key cog in the regional economy. E.) The Three Rivers Industrial Development team handles the direct industrial recruitment and business expansion efforts on a contract basis on behalf of Four Counties (Union, Pontotoc, Chickasaw, and Itawamba). This approach of regionalizing the role of a local industrial developer has shown great success and operated with significant cost sharing and stabilization of an often unstable position. F.) Three Rivers developed or was instrumental in other regional collaborations such as the Mississippi Corridor Consortium and the GM&O Rails-to-Trails Recreational District of North Mississippi, which operates a 44.5 bicycle trail on an abandoned rail line further reinforce the cooperative and innovative spirit of the region. The Itawamba Mississippi-an Railway, LLC was recently established and is managed by Three Rivers to handle Port and Railroad operations for a short line Railway that runs between Fulton & Amory, MS.

DEDICATED LABOR FORCE: Three Rivers' workforce has forged a reputation for its strong work ethic. Global companies such as Toyota, Ashley Furniture Industries, Grammer AG, Pride Mobility and others have pointed to this reputation as one of the primary reasons for deciding to locate or expand in northeast Mississippi. The regional labor force takes pride in its work and companies like True Temper Sports, LLC, Cooper Tire, Daybrite, have maintained operations in the region for several decades due to the commitment of their employees. The thriving up-holstered furniture industry has weathered the initial shock of offshoring to Pacific Rim countries and continues to

produce some of the most productive furniture workers in the U.S.

EXCELLENT WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM: The Mississippi Partnership is responsible for establishing and maintaining a skilled system that provides the highest quality services and a skilled workforce. Services are delivered through partnerships with community colleges, planning and development districts, the Mississippi Department of Employment Security, the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services, and other partners located within the 27-county workforce investment area. The adaptability of Mississippi's community college system as well as the willingness of college and state officials to tailor training programs to meet companies' needs have resulted in an excellent workforce development system. Three Rivers, along with numerous partners helped establish a "Furniture Academy" to provide workers the skills necessary to succeed in the Industry. Other collaborations include working with Toyota and others to provide internships that allow a student to go to college and obtain a degree while working part time, which in turn often results in full time employment upon completion.

RENOWNED UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES: Three Rivers is home to the University of Mississippi as well as Itawamba Community College's main campus and satellite campuses for Northeast Mississippi Community College (New Albany) and Northwest Mississippi Community College (Oxford). The identified entities offer excellent partnership opportunities for economic and community development initiatives as well as respected educational and training programs.

HEALTH CARE GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES: Strong regional hospitals such as Baptist Memorial Hospital and North Mississippi Health Services, as well as excellent training programs like Itawamba Community College's Health Center and nursing programs through Northeast MS CC, offer opportunities for continued health care growth throughout the region. The additional jobs created to meet regional health care needs along with the enhanced skills and capabilities fostered through the region's high-quality workforce development initiatives will foster positive economic impacts throughout the region as health care occupations continue to increase.

TUITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (TAP): The regional TAP is a partnership that allows high school seniors to receive tuition assistance for four regular semesters at a community college. TAP is a ten-year program with a \$25,000 maximum grant per year from Three Rivers that requires a local/private match equal to the lesser of 4 to 1 or the equivalent of what one mill will produce in the participating county. Three Rivers administers the TAP at no cost to the participating counties.

Counties with locally-established tuition assistance programs already in place are eligible to establish a separate community and economic development program with Three Rivers whereby the ten-year \$25,000 grant shall be made available if matched as described in the preceding paragraph with local and private monies.

Federal grants, state grants, scholarships, and VA benefits are applied first toward tuition the TAP being the last funding source applied. Participating students must enroll and successfully complete 12 semester hours and maintain a 2.0 grade point average. The TAP is important to regional economic development initiatives as it allows all graduating seniors an opportunity to continue their education following high school.

EMERGING AUTOMOTIVE SECTOR: Toyota's new manufacturing facility has fostered 2,000 new jobs and hundreds of automotive supplier jobs have developed as a result of the company's decision to locate in Union County. Toyota's new manufacturing facilities typically result in a second phase, which often doubles the initial job creation totals. Since a second phase would yield additional automotive supplier facilities and jobs, Three Rivers anticipates the automotive sector will continue to grow as Toyota and its suppliers expand operations throughout northeast Mississippi.

RESHORING OPPORTUNITIES: As overseas' labor and commodity costs continue to rise and shipping fees continue to be impacted by increasing energy costs, many companies who moved domestic operations to countries such as China, continue to look to return to the U.S. In addition to the playing field being leveled somewhat due to overseas' cost increases, companies also have pointed to intellectual property concerns, consumers' preferences for American-made products, stagnant (and in some cases declining) domestic wages, and the abundance of skilled but unemployed or underemployed labor throughout the U.S. as critical reasons for reshoring. This has especially been evident in recent reshoring or expansion projects related to the regional furniture economy.

PLENTIFUL NATURAL RESOURCES: Due to the plentiful natural resources located throughout the region, there are opportunities for these resources to be further developed in order to positively impact the regional economy. Three Rivers' fertile soil as well as the prevalent forest areas and other viable natural resources located throughout the region offer significant economic growth opportunities.

MULTIMODAL CAPABILITIES: The

three regional ports located along the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway offer opportunities for enhanced multimodal opportunities. Port Itawamba, Port of Aberdeen, and Port of Amory continue to enhance industrial sites and product along these ports and establish ways to improve transportation capabilities.

Weaknesses & Threats

LOW EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT: The region's low educational attainment makes it more difficult for economic development stakeholders to recruit high-skill, high-wage occupations. Three Rivers, the CREATE Foundation, the Gilmore Foundation, and other regional education stakeholders are working together to increase educational attainment and quality throughout the region.

INFRASTRUCTURE DEFICIENCIES: Regional infrastructure improvements are needed to open up additional economic and community development opportunities. There are local water and sewer systems that have antiquated infrastructure that is in dire need of repair and/or replacement in certain areas. Enhanced telecommunications infrastructure is needed in order to provide enhanced broadband capacity and availability, especially within the region's most rural areas. Natural gas and electric infrastructure improvements are needed in certain locations due to existing and/or future demand increases caused by industry and population growth. Utility infrastructure capacity and condition issues are most prevalent in rural areas served by non-municipal utility providers.

In addition, transportation infrastructure improvements are needed in order to promote further economic growth and development within the region. Multimodal infrastructure improvements are needed at the region's three ports to open up additional mar-

kets and promote further development along the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. Increased four-lane access is needed in order to ease congestion and help communities recruit additional jobs and private investment. Bridge improvements are needed in order to improve roadway conditions and enhance safety.

Recent infrastructure projects have been vital to regional economic and community development initiatives and continued improvements will enable the region to better compete within the global marketplace.

LOW PERCENTAGE OF INNOVATION: In terms of human capital and economic dynamics, Three Rivers has a lower rate than both the State of Mississippi and the United States according to the Innovation Index, a tool EDA helped develop to assess regional innovation capacities. When you look at productivity and employment, Three Rivers has a higher rate than the State of Mississippi, but (similar to human capital and economic dynamics) both areas fall well behind the nation. When you look at economic well-being, the three geographic areas are similar, but the region does fall somewhat below the state and national figures. In looking at all of Mississippi, the amount of resources available to entrepreneurs and businesses falls well below the rest of the nation.

The recent construction of the University of Mississippi's Insight Park as well as recent EDA business incubator investments in Lafayette and Lee counties will help spark additional innovation within the region as entrepreneurs take advantage of available facilities in order to grow new businesses. Additional business incubator facilities as well as other proposed growth initiatives on the horizon will help address the low innovation percentage as well.

LOW AVERAGE ANNUAL WAGES: Three Rivers has a significantly lower average wage per job than the United

States and the only county with an average higher than the State of Mississippi the past several years is Lee County, which serves as a regional employment hub and has a much higher population than any other county in our region. Three Rivers will need to continue to seek out higher-skill, higher-wage jobs in order to increase regional wages and reduce the income gap.

LIMITED FINANCIAL RESOURCES: As noted in the financial resources summary, local governments in the region have limited financial resources and recent budget cuts at the state and federal levels have intensified the fiscal restrictions placed on counties and municipalities throughout the region. The aforementioned budget strains have caused some local governments to no longer provide the same level of tax incentives to existing and prospective businesses, which impacts regional employment and investment growth opportunities. Regional stakeholders will need to take advantage of available resources and implement sustainable initiatives in order to address their financial limitations.

GLOBAL ECONOMIC FLUCTUATIONS: Turbulent economic conditions at the national and international levels play a significant role in the regional economy as well, which is evident by the increased unemployment that occurred during the most recent recession. Businesses throughout the region operate within a global marketplace and Three Rivers is not immune to domestic and foreign issues well outside of northeast Mississippi. The region must seek to become more resilient to national and global economic issues in order to reduce the negative impacts said problems have on local and regional economies.

BRAIN DRAIN: As with most non-metropolitan regions, Three Rivers is plagued by the emigration of highly-trained and educated individ-

uals to other regions. Typically, the movement can be traced to better job opportunities in other regions. As noted in a preceding section, the region has a low percentage of innovation when compared to the rest of the nation and many educated young people and skilled workers must look outside their home counties for employment. The only three counties with a positive net migration between 2010 and 2011 are the two most urbanized counties (Lafayette and Lee) as well as the county where Toyota recently commenced operations (Union). Regional job growth in high-skill, high-wage sectors will make the region more enticing to skilled and educated individuals looking for employment.

LONG-TERM POVERTY CYCLE: As noted in the poverty summary, high poverty rates plague Three Rivers as well as the State of Mississippi. The trend is not new and living in poverty conditions has been a daily battle for generations of Mississippi residents. Improved educational quality and attainment as well as regional job growth will help the region address this long-term economic trend and reduce poverty levels for area residents.

5: Goals & Objectives

Vision Statement

Three Rivers seeks to promote overall economic development, foster responsible short- and long-term community planning, and aid general civic, social, and economic development.

Goal 1: Develop and enhance regional infrastructure to increase economic competitiveness

- Objective 1.1: Improve utility and transportation infrastructure as well as other public facilities for community and economic development
- Objective 1.2: Increase access and utilization of telecommunications technology
- Objective 1.3: Promote and further develop multimodal transportation networks
- Objective 1.4: Preserve and enhance environmental assets through revitalization, reclamation, and promotion of environmental stewardship
- Objective 1.5: Identify, secure, and improve properties for economic utilization
- Objective 1.6: Identify and implement planning and technical assistance initiatives for existing and future infrastructure systems

Goal 2: Increase regional job opportunities and income

- Objective 2.1: Diversify the economic base by targeting new businesses and emerging sectors
- Objective 2.2: Increase the domestic and global competitiveness of the existing economic base
- Objective 2.3: Enhance regional entrepreneurial activity and small business development
- Objective 2.4: Foster the development and utilization of innovative technologies
- Objective 2.5: Identify, develop, and market strategic regional assets

- Objective 2.6: Promote sustainable economic uses of natural resources
- Objective 2.7: Promote investments in sustainable energy and other “green” projects
- Objective 2.8: Identify and implement planning and technical assistance initiatives to strengthen regional job and capital investment opportunities
- Objective 2.9: Enhance regional marketing tools and resources

Goal 3: Strengthen the capacity of the region to compete in the global economy

- Objective 3.1: Enhance workforce skills through training and education
- Objective 3.2: Increase educational attainment and achievement
- Objective 3.3: Increase access to quality early childhood and K-12 education
- Objective 3.4: Increase the availability of affordable, high-quality health care
- Objective 3.5: Promote regional collaboration involving the public and private sectors and community leadership development
- Objective 3.6: Improve the availability and affordability of regional housing
- Objective 3.7: Enhance cultural and recreational opportunities
- Objective 3.8: Improve public transit opportunities
- Objective 3.9: Identify and implement planning and technical assistance initiatives to strengthen regional competitiveness

6: Plan of Action & Integration

Per EDA's guidelines, Three Rivers has developed a plan of action to implement the goals and objectives of the CEDS in a manner that:

- A. Promotes economic development and opportunity
- B. Fosters effective transportation access
- C. Enhances and protects the environment
- D. Maximizes effective development and use of the workforce consistent with any applicable state or local workforce investment strategy
- E. Promotes the use of technology in economic development, including access to high-speed telecommunications
- F. Balances resources through sound management of physical development

G. Obtains and utilizes adequate funds and other resources

The goals and objectives included within this CEDS line up with the economic development priorities of the State of Mississippi, the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), and the Delta Regional Authority (DRA). All of the aforementioned entities seek to increase the number of high-skill, high-wage jobs within the State of Mississippi while also addressing many of the socioeconomic outcomes in which Mississippi trails the rest of the United States (educational attainment, per capita income, etc.).

The defined regional goals and objectives also are consistent with local and state workforce investment strategies.

Increasing the regional knowledge and skills bases to facilitate growth in new and emerging sectors goes hand-in-hand with the workforce development strategies implemented at each level and the net result of the capacity development strategies will be an improved labor force.

In addition, the CEDS is consistent with other local and regional planning mechanisms such as local comprehensive local plans, local economic development goals, and the Three Rivers Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan. Sustainable growth and development practices are key components in planning initiatives throughout the region and the CEDS offers similar integration and plan consistency at the local level as it does at the state and federal levels.

7: Performance Measures

The primary performance measures used to evaluate Three Rivers' development and implementation of the CEDS include (but are not limited to) the following:

- A. Number of jobs created after implementation of the CEDS
- B. Amount of private sector investment after implementation of the CEDS
- C. Number of jobs retained in the region
- D. Number and types of investments undertaken within the region
- E. Changes in the economic environment of the region

GOAL1: Regional Infrastructure Enhancement Initiative

- A. Number of infrastructure projects

- B. Amount of funding secured (grants, loans, etc.)
- C. Amount of private investment leveraged
- D. Amount of public investment leveraged
- E. Number of jobs created and/or retained

GOAL2: Regional Capacity Development Initiative

- A. Workforce participation rate
- B. Number of workforce training participants
- C. Number of workforce training programs
- D. Educational attainment percentages
- E. Health care sector employment
- F. Number of cultural and recreational projects

- G. Net migration totals

GOAL 3: Regional Economic Growth and Diversification Initiative

- A. Number of new employers
- B. Number of jobs created and retained
- C. Number of businesses and employees within business incubators
- D. Number and percentage of employees within various economic sectors
- E. Regional average wage
- F. Regional per capita income

Supplemental quantitative and qualitative measures will likely be reviewed during the implementation process, but the aforementioned lists include several key economic indicators.

8: Regional Resiliency

EDA evaluates the economic resiliency of a region in three ways:

- the ability to recover quickly from a shock
- the ability to withstand a shock, and
- the ability to avoid the shock altogether.

During Three Rivers' analysis of the region, vulnerabilities were identified. In the past, the district has suffered from various shocks to the economy. The decline of furniture manufacturing during the late 1990s and early 2000s caused many skilled workers within the Three Rivers district to lose their job.

In an attempt to keep these skilled workers within the area, Three Rivers took a proactive approach and helped recruit Toyota to the area. The recruitment of the major auto manufacturer has led to thousands of jobs for workers in not only the building of automobiles, but with the parts suppliers who also located to the area.

Because of the dramatic downturn of the furniture manufacturing sector in the past, Three Rivers keeps a watchful eye on industry trends to try and keep the available employment opportunities diverse.

The potential for a shock to employment for the region isn't the only shock that could potentially affect the Three Rivers district. The area has been plagued with severe weather in the past that has affected all eight counties.

Each of the eight counties within the district coordinate with both the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) to create Hazardous Mitigation plans. These plans help the counties stay on top of planning for any potential natural disasters.

In the past, Three Rivers has made loan funds available for affected governments while they wait for state and

federal funding to rebuild after natural disasters. The Three Rivers staff also has helped affected communities and governments after natural disasters while they try to work toward stabilization.

After devastating tornadoes hit the region in both 2011 and 2014, Three Rivers took a proactive approach to help local governments. Through a grant with EDA, Three Rivers set up a network to house all county records for the region in different locations. Housing vital information such as court records, land deeds, tax records, etc., in two locations not within the Three Rivers district allow local governments to maintain a working system in case of a natural disaster. These off-site locations also provide a peace of mind that vital records won't be completely lost if a disaster were to occur.

9: Public & Private Sector Participation

The development of the new CEDS has been a collaborative effort involving both the public and private sectors. Three Rivers and other economic development stakeholders have coordinated their efforts and resources to develop a vision for the forthcoming five-year CEDS cycle. Public and private sector representatives from throughout the region understand the importance of a collaborative approach and have helped implement regional economic development strategies and initiatives for many years.

Three Rivers continually communicates with its economic development partners in order to learn more about regional needs and projects. The communication yields immeasurable benefits and the interactions provide excellent forums for innovative ideas and strategies. You cannot address public and private sector needs if you do not know what the needs are and the best way to learn more about the issues each side faces is through frequent networking. Three Rivers partners with local governments, economic development organizations, businesses, community colleges, and various other entities to promote positive regional outcomes and the organization's collaborative approach continued through the preparation of the latest CEDS.

The ten-member CEDS strategy committee provided a wealth of knowledge regarding the state of the region and their input was vital to the development of this document. The committee members work in the trenches to foster positive economic outcomes every single day and their collective knowledge and experience served as vital resources in communicating regional strengths, weaknesses, needs, and opportunities. The committee also interacts with the public and private sectors on a continual basis in order to address regional economic development issues and their vast networks enable them to provide firsthand knowledge of where the region stands as well as what direction it needs to go in order to remain competitive in the global marketplace.

Three Rivers utilized a wide variety of local, regional, state, and federal resources to develop this document. Three Rivers distributed economic development surveys to local government officials in order to gather worthwhile information regarding the region. Public and private sector participation as well as the research and analyses conducted by Three Rivers were integral to the CEDS development process. A copy of the CEDS survey is included in the appendix.

On August 28, 2017, Three Rivers published a public notice within the regional newspaper (The Daily Journal) to notify

CEDS Committee

- Vaunita Martin - Itawamba County Development Council
- Hunter Aycock - Community Development Foundation
- Chelsea T. Baulch - Monroe County Chamber of Commerce
- Sheila M. Freely - Calhoun Economic Development Association
- Phil Nanney - Union County Development Association
- Nadara Cole - Northeast Mississippi Community College
- Joe Lowder - Itawamba Community College
- Ellen Russell - Pontotoc County Chamber of Commerce & Main Street Association

area residents and businesses of the organization's intent to submit a new Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy to the Economic Development Administration. The public notice stated a draft of the document was available for public review and comments would be accepted until 4:30 p.m. on September 27, 2017. The comment period followed the Economic Development Administration's stipulation that a draft must be made available for public review at least 30 days prior to the document's submission to the agency. Please see the accompanying public notice and proof of publication for further information regarding the public participation process.

Three Rivers will continue to seek participation from the public and private sectors as it implements the latest CEDS. All of the applicable EDA rules and regulations will be followed to ensure the process remains a collaborative effort between the public and private sectors. Three Rivers will submit annual CEDS performance reports to update EDA on the implementation process and discuss public and private sector participation. In addition, the CEDS will continue to be posted on Three Rivers' website to enable the public and private sectors constant access to the document. If Three Rivers or the CEDS strategy committee deems technical changes are necessary to the CEDS during the five-year cycle of the document, Three Rivers will make certain to follow EDA's public notification requirements.

There are ten members of Three Rivers' CEDS strategy committee. Each county has one representative and there are two members representing workforce development and higher education. Seven of the eight county representatives have been nominated by the private sector and one has been nominated by the public sector.

10: Public Notice

Three Rivers Planning and Development District (Three Rivers) plans to submit its latest Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) to the Economic Development Administration (EDA) on September 28, 2017. EDA requires that Three Rivers make its CEDS available for public review and comment at least 30 days prior to the document's submission to the agency.

The CEDS is available for review during normal business hours (8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding holidays) at Three Rivers' office on 75 South Main Street in Pontotoc, Mississippi. In addition, Three Rivers will post a copy of the CEDS to its website (<http://www.trpdd.com/ceds>).

Comments regarding the CEDS will be accepted until 4:30 p.m. on September 27, 2017. Please mail written comments to Kurt Brummett, Three Rivers PDD, Post Office Box 690, Pontotoc, MS 38863.